

How to Talk with Your Child at Any Age About Respect and Healthy Relationships

HOW TO TALK WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Talk to your children at an early age about respect, healthy relationships, and how to avoid abuse and violence. You can help them cultivate a healthy sense of self at an early age – a key tool they may need in the future to avoid using violence, or to protect themselves or a friend from an abuser.

*** Talk to Younger Kids about Respecting their Bodies and Protecting their Privacy**

If you sense that your child does not want to be touched by a friend or family member, ask if she/he would like some personal space. Say that it's OK to tell other people not to touch them, and help them enforce their desire for privacy by backing them up in social situations. Likewise, remind children to respect other people's wishes not to be touched – a fundamental principal of mutual respect that will help them have healthy romantic relationships when they are older.

*** Teach Toddlers and Elementary School Kids that Disagreements are Normal**

Explain that disagreements can help family members and others communicate with each other. But make sure children understand that people must try to express anger or frustration as calmly as possible, and never with physical or verbal abuse.

***Teach Children about Healthy Relationships**

Be a role model. Demonstrate respect for yourself and for those around you. Ask your children if other people treat each other the way they like to be treated. Talk to your children about what they like in a friendship; those early observations will help your children form healthy friendships and romantic relationships as they grow up.

HOW TO TALK WITH 'TWEENS AND TEENS

Opening up lines of communication can be difficult with 'tweens and teenagers, who are regularly asked to listen quietly to lectures from authority figures about risks associated with everything from sexual activity to drug and alcohol abuse. But a conversation during which you solicit a child's views and show appreciation for his/her strengths can strengthen your relationship, build parent/child respect, and help support a child's healthy behaviors. Place a high priority on educating your children about violence in relationships, even if they seem resistant to these messages.

*** Discuss Healthy Relationships**

Our children are inundated with messages about romantic relationships, not all of which are positive. Talk to your children about the components of healthy relationships: mutual respect; a willingness to compromise; support for each other's goals and ambitions; a shared responsibility in decision-making; an openness to differences of opinion; and an acceptance of friends outside the relationship. Talk to them about jealousy, which is a normal part of relationships – but let them know that scare-tactics and controlling behavior have no part in any relationship.

*** Inquire Rather Than Lecture**

Use “teachable moments” like the publicity surrounding Chris Brown’s alleged abuse to ask teenagers questions about dating violence such as: Do you think Chris Brown should have used violence? Is it ever okay to hit someone else? Why do you think Rihanna resumed her relationship with Chris Brown? If Rihanna gets hurt again after she reconciles with Chris Brown, will it be her fault?

*** Give Clear Anti-Violence Messages**

Convey that abuse is never acceptable in any kind of relationship and that nothing in a victim’s behavior or a perpetrator’s background justifies violence. Let teenagers know that victims deserve protection, support and privacy, and are not to blame for the abuse or for staying in abusive relationships. Teach teens that perpetrators are very likely to batter again if they don’t get help and must be held accountable for their actions.

*** Personalize the Conversation**

Ask teenagers if they know anyone who has ever experienced abuse in any kind of relationship. Follow up with questions about what they would do and whom they would talk to if they discovered a friend was being abused. Ask teens what they would do if they found themselves in an abusive relationship. Where would they go? Whom would they confide in? If a parent has a personal story to share about a friend or family member, this is the time to tell it.

*** Insist on a Dialogue**

You may encounter teens who are unwilling to discuss the issue. Don’t stand for silence. Even if teens are reluctant to talk to you about violence, keep trying. If they continue to demur, register your disappointment and explain that you are concerned, not angry. If all else fails, ask a person your child respects and likes – a friend, a mentor, a relative, a religious leader – to broach the subject.

*** Talk to Boys about Violence**

Outside influences often equate manliness with being tough and in control – messages that can justify or support violent behavior. Counter these harmful messages with those that demonstrate that strong men show deference and compassion for the girls and women in their lives. Reinforce this positive message by telling young boys that women deserve respect, and that violence never equals strength. Repeat the message early and often.

Parents should approach boys they suspect are using violence in relationships with a combination of honesty and resolve. If boys have witnessed or experienced violence in their home, tell them you regret it and will not tolerate it in the future. Inform them that stopping abusive behavior will keep them out of trouble with school or the law, and will help them experience the joys of healthy relationships.

*** Keep the Conversation Going**

Tell your kids that your door is always open. Let them know you want to talk to them about the good and the bad in their lives. Remind them that their safety and well-being is your top concern. Assure them you will respect their privacy so long as their safety or their friends' safety is not at risk. Raise the topic again at a later date to keep the conversation going.

HOW TO TALK WITH YOUNG ADULTS

As your child grows into a young adult and creates a home, and family of their own, continue to provide support and advice to help them avoid abuse and violence in their lives.

*** Raise Awareness about Rape and Sexual Assault**

Young women age 16 to 24 experience the highest rates of rape and sexual assault. Approximately 2/3 of rapes are committed by someone known to the victim, such as a friend, or acquaintance of an intimate partner. Talk to your son or daughter about alcohol, drinking responsibly and being aware of their surroundings. Recommend that your child use a buddy system in social situations to keep them and their friends safe. Most importantly, your child should trust their instinct on personal safety and refuse to do anything that makes them feel uncomfortable.

*** Responding to Stalking**

As your son or daughter prepares to attend college or move out of your home, remind them to trust their own instincts about people and behavior that makes them feel uncomfortable, threatened, or harassed. People age 18 and 19 experience the highest rates of stalking, which is commonly committed by a current or former intimate partner, a friend, roommate, or neighbor. Stalking can include receiving unwanted phone calls, unsolicited emails and letters, or waiting for a victim at a particular location.

Tell your son or daughter that stalking is a serious issue and should not be dismissed as annoying or irritating. Encourage your child to immediately report if they feel threatened, harassed, or stalked. They should seek out help and support from the police, school administration, and friends they trust.

*** Talk about Sexual and Reproductive Health**

Relationship abuse has many serious consequences and one of them can be harmful to a woman's reproductive health. Studies show that relationship or dating abuse can have reproductive health consequences, including unplanned pregnancy and exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS transmissions. Physical violence is not the only form of abuse facing young people today. Birth control sabotage and sexual coercion are insidious forms of abuse and control that occur much more often than many people realize. This happens most often to young women.

If you think your young adult may be sexually active, let her/him know that their relationship and how a partner treats you can affect your health. Ask does your partner listen when you say no to sex? Does your partner support using birth control? Is your partner kind and respectful of your choices? A partner deciding when to have sex, messing with your birth control, and refusing to use condoms are all signs of an unhealthy relationship.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD NEEDS HELP

You may experience a range of intense emotions if you suspect your child is in an abusive or violent relationship. Don't let fear, anger or a desire to assign blame keep you from talking to your children openly.

*** Know and Watch for Signs of Abuse**

In addition to physical signs such as bruises and/or unexplained injuries, look for emotional signs such as depression, mood swings and fearful or anxious behavior. Also watch out for psychological signals such as low self-esteem and loss of interest in school. Pay special attention if your child receives incessant phone, email and/or text

messages and isolates him or herself from friends and family members. Consider whether your child might be using violence, as well as be a victim of it. In addition to violent behavior, abusers may exhibit extreme jealousy, possessiveness, verbal abuse, and degrading and/or objectifying language about girlfriends or members of the opposite sex.

***Approach your Child in a Safe, Quiet and Private Setting**

This might be during a drive in the car, and tell her/him that you have observed signs that suggest she/he is experiencing some problems in his/her relationship. Discuss your observations and make sure she/he knows you care deeply and are not there to make judgments. As with all difficult teen conversations, your child may not appear to be listening, but odds are she/he is. If your daughter or son doesn't open up, say that you are worried and want to talk about the situation. Involve a third party if necessary.

***Get Information and Get Help from an Expert**

If your child does open up, find out what has happened in the relationship and how she/he feels about it. The next step is to seek help from an anti-violence expert who can advise you and your child about the safest way forward. Understand that your child may resent you for intruding if she/he is not ready to leave the relationship. And know that there could be serious consequences if you immediately ban the relationship: Your child could secretly continue the relationship and shut down lines of communication with you. Alternatively, if your child breaks off the relationship, violence can sometimes escalate. That is why it is important to do safety planning when leaving an abusive relationship.

***Engage Siblings**

If you have other children, they may be worried about the situation as well. Remember to reassure them that you are doing all you can to help. Use the experience to talk to them about the importance of healthy relationships.

***Helpful Things to Say to Your Child If You Think She/He May be a Victim:**

- I am not judging you, but I am worried about you.
- We can figure this out together.
- You are not alone; this happens to a lot of kids.
- It's not your fault. No one can make another person use violence.
- This is not something to be ashamed of, or embarrassed about.
- There are people who can help, and they will protect your privacy.
- Let's figure out how you can be safer at school and while you're out with friends.

- Do any of your friends – or any of his friends – know what is happening? What do they think?
- Do you think anything would help your partner stop doing this?

***Approach Your Child if You Think They May be Abusive**

If you think your daughter or son may be abusive or violent with their partner, encourage her/him to be honest and listen. Tell them abuse and violence are NOT acceptable and that violence will not solve their problems. Let them know when you truly care for someone you don't hurt them or try to control them. Abuse is a choice and there are resources and counselors that can help her/him understand the consequences, choose alternatives to violence, and stop the abuse.

***Share Resources that Can Help**

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline 1-866-331-9474 1-866-331-8453 (TTY) www.loveisrespect.org	National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) 1-800-787-3224 (TTY) www.ndvh.org	Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) Hotline 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) www.rainn.org
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For more talking points on how to address these topics with your child or teen, refer to "[Dinner Table Talk](#)".